

Aboriginal access to firearms for wildlife harvesting: A policy proposal by Jon Altman

In 2002, a research collaboration commenced between the ANU's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) and the Northern Territory University's ARC Key Centre for Tropical Wildlife Management (KCTWM) funded in large part by the Natural Heritage Trust and auspiced by the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation. The aim was to investigate the harvesting of wildlife by Aboriginal outstation residents in the Maningrida region. This research is field-based and quantitative and, to date, two periods of intensive fieldwork have been completed, in July 2002 (by a team of five researchers) and January 2003 (by a team of three) with eastern Kuninjkun harvesters in a region—bounded by the Tomkinson River and the Liverpool River—west of Maningrida township. This particular research locality has been selected because a comparative quantitative data base, collected by Jon Altman with the same group in 1979–80 for 296 days over a seasonal cycle, allows comparative analysis. Analysis to date has allowed the researchers to make important observations about wildlife harvesting (highly significant in both periods), sustainability of species (sustainability being demonstrated by a similar range of wildlife harvested in 1979–80 and 2002–03), the impact of the recent arrival of the cane toad (apparently negative on reptile harvesting) and potential to expand customary harvesting for commercial purposes. Much of this research is in the process of being written up. This brief focuses on only one issue, the availability and quality of firearms available to Aboriginal people who are dependent on wildlife harvesting for their livelihood.

For a variety of reasons there is evidence that Aboriginal access to firearms has declined in the last 20 years. This is despite the fact that real cash income levels have increased and eastern Kuninjkun private investment in vehicles has also escalated with a concomitant increase in harvesting productivity, especially when feral water buffaloes are successfully hunted. In 1979–80, there was a minimum four shotguns (12G), one to two .22 rifles and another rifle (.44 magnum) at Mumeka outstation (population 1979–80 circa 32 average). During two periods of fieldwork at four localities in July 2002 and at two localities in January 2003, there was a very clear decline in availability of firearms. For example, in July 2002, residents of Barridjowgeng outstation did not have access to a gun, people at Kumorulu and Mimanyar had a shotgun at each locality, while at a seasonal camp at Nandel, people had access to a shotgun and a .308 rifle. There was a very positive and quantified correlation between access to firearms and higher levels of wildlife harvesting of animals such as magpie geese, feral buffalo, wallabies and feral pig. In January 2003, residents of Mumeka did not own a firearm, and consequently had to borrow a dilapidated 12-gauge shotgun, held together with wire and sticky tape and without a sight, from Gugodbabuldi some 5 kms away. Whenever the shotgun was available at Mumeka at a time when wallabies and other mammals were an important part of the diet, documented hunting returns increased dramatically.

The causes for the decline in availability of fire arms appear to be directly linked to far stricter gun licencing laws introduced by the Northern Territory Government in response to the Howard government's appeal for more stringent gun licencing laws Australia-wide in the aftermath of the Port Arthur massacre. In the Northern Territory, these new laws

mean that individual gun owners need to pass tests conducted by the police; guns cannot be purchased on behalf of hunters, something that occurred frequently in 1979–80; and owners of guns are required to purchase lockable gun safes and to transport guns in vehicles in gun safes. Furthermore, Aboriginal people with any criminal convictions are prohibited from owning guns, although there is no monitoring of gun use in remote situations. While such stringent requirements may make sense in urban and rural contexts in the Northern Territory (and elsewhere), they make little sense in the remote Arnhem Land outstations context. The net effects of these more stringent gun licencing laws are as follows:

- The stock of firearms owned by Aboriginal people is declining
- The available stock of firearms is often in a poor state of repair
- This means that firearms are both less readily available and less effective
- The poor state of firearms creates very real occupational health and safety concerns
- This could be exacerbated if there is any legal requirement to use stainless steel rather than lead cartridges in aging 12-gauge shotguns
- The contribution of Aboriginal hunters to feral animal control (pigs, feral buffalo, feral cattle) is being jeopardised
- Most importantly, wildlife harvesting returns from hunting are declining for groups that have limited or no access to firearms.

Given the empirical evidence that wildlife harvesting remains a very important element of the customary economy at outstation communities in Arnhem Land and government concern about the socioeconomic and health status of Aboriginal people, there seems to be a strong case for some action to be taken to address this issue that is largely invisible to the outside world.

This proposal suggests that the Northern Territory Government might be able to assist in addressing this emerging problem by underwriting the employment of a professional ‘gun man’ to assist remote Aboriginal communities. The term ‘gun man’ is deliberately chosen for its similarity to the widely-known ‘tax man’ sponsored by the Australian Taxation Office to assist individuals in remote Aboriginal communities fill their income tax returns. It is proposed that the ‘gun man’ be a qualified person with a high level of expertise in gunsmanship, possibly even a gunsmith, but also with cross-cultural experience working and communicating with Aboriginal people. The multiple roles of the ‘gun man’ would be to travel to remote communities and assist Aboriginal adults:

- Gain the requisite formal skills to obtain a gun licence
- Assist these people to sit the gun licence test
- Assist people with purchasing firearms
- Provide advice on occupational health and safety issues
- Provide advice on appropriate hardware and ammunition
- Undertake a census of guns and be resourced to buy back unsafe firearms.

There are initiatives under way at some communities in this broad area. For example, the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation’s sheetmetal workshop produces relatively cheap gun

safes that could be marketed by the 'gun man' outside the Maningrida region. Similarly, in the Kakadu Region research is under way to examine alternatives to lead ammunition and to find generic relatively cheap and robust firearms for Aboriginal hunters. The 'gun man' could disseminate information about such initiatives, while also providing public education to communities about gun safety and gun use issues.

It is recognised that Northern Territory Government underwriting of such a position may require an up-front investment in paying a salary and providing a vehicle for travel. The all-up costs of such a full-time position and associated expenses would be in the region of \$100,000–120,000 in year 1, although some user-pays cost recovery (for example a gun purchase charge) and contributions from sources such as the Aboriginals Benefit Account, land councils or major Aboriginal organisations may be a possibility. But there is little doubt that considerable public benefit could derive from such an initiative and Northern Territory Government leadership. In particular, there is high probability that returns to Aboriginal hunters would increase, enhancing incentives to participate in this element of the customary economy and increasing community dietary intakes. There is also a high probability that hunting of feral animals, particularly feral pigs and buffalo would increase with concomitant decline in environmental degradation and loss of species biodiversity.

It is strongly urged that consideration be given to pilot this policy proposal in the 2003–04 budgetary context, that would match the seasonal cycle with dry season 2003 being an opportune time for the 'gun man' to travel to communities in the Top End. Performance indicators for the proposal could include measurement of number of community workshops conducted, number of new licences issued, number of new guns purchased and old guns bought back, new business opportunities for Aboriginal enterprises (e.g. in provision of gun safes), and links made with Community Ranger Programs mediated on Aboriginal land by the Northern Land Council's Caring for Country Unit or major regional organisations like Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation. Evaluation of the initiative would be possible after 12 months (or sooner depending on the onset of the 2003–04 wet season) to assess viability of continuity.

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